Tour of destruction

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

Master Sgt. Val Gempis and I met in Colombo, Sri Lanka, about three weeks after the tsunami wiped out the island's eastern and southern coasts.

Mr. Dudley Emura, our driver and interpreter, was experienced with taking media on a tour of the ruins. He would have much rather given the media a tour of the many beautiful locations on his island paradise, but they, like we, wanted to see the devastation for ourselves.

In Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, it was business as usual. The tsunami didn't seem to affect big-city life. But it had. Villagers had died just 12 miles away. As we drove south and the damage to the island intensified, conversation nearly trickled to nothing. The mood, somber. The saying "It had to be seen to be believed" was relevant in this case. Television and photographs didn't capture the utter destruction.

It was apparent the island coastal community was beautiful before the killer waves crashed ashore. Palm and coconut trees swayed in the breeze and the beach sand was soft, white and inviting. However, there was nobody on the beach. No longer was it a place of relaxation. It was a place to be feared.

As we drove, fleeting images caught my eye — a woman squatting on the remains that was once her home, peering into a clear plastic bag trying to determine what was inside. Fishermen tried to repair a 30-foot fishing vessel that was tossed ashore like a matchstick. Makeshift white flags jutted from the rubble to mark the place where a loved one was missing. There were 6,000 white flags in Sri Lanka.

My mind took snapshots of the devastation for later use in nightmares. Words like sobering, humbling, sad, frightening and awe came to mind. The enormity of the disaster was too much to comprehend. You cannot liken it to a war zone unless you compare it to Hiroshima. Even that comparison is unequal. The atomic bomb leveled four square miles of land. Sri Lanka's 'ground zero' stretched along 400 miles of coastline, not counting the 11 other countries' coastal communities laid to waste.

Driving through one village, we witnessed destruction on both sides of the road. Villagers stood amidst the ruins because they had only two choices — stay in the relief camps or pick through the rubble that was once their homes.

At least while they were at their homes there was a chance that journalists, like ourselves, would stop, take pictures, and give them a few rupiah for their trouble. They weren't begging, but the 375 rupiah a week given to them by their government wasn't much. A little less than 100 rupiah equal one American dollar.

Amid the destruction, we also saw smiles. Standing in the ruins, islanders would wave as we passed by. Children laughed and played in the water when a Navy water truck stopped by a village orphanage.

Although America's men and women in uniform couldn't help every villager, their trucks rumbled through the villages to the worst-hit areas — their heavy machinery cleared roads so more organizations could help provide assistance. Air Force helicopters thump, thump, thumped about 500 feet over treetops. Cargo aircraft droned overhead.

For me, Operation Unified Assistance was more than the delivery of relief supplies and water. The U.S. military was delivering hope for a better tomorrow.

— Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr. sits among vegetables *in an HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter awaiting airlift to a village close to the hard-hit eastern coast of Sri Lanka.*